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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000863

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY US
FRIENDSHIP GROUP

CARACAS 00000863 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) attended a breakfast July 9 hosted by the National Assembly (AN)'s Interparliamentary Friendship Group at the offices of AN First Vice President Saul Ortega. Francisco Torrealba, who is president of the group, and Calixto Ortega were also in attendance. All three Deputies are from President Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and are longstanding members of the group. While the Deputies noted their concern about Secretary Clinton's July 7 interview with Globovision, they lauded the US reaction to Honduras and suggested it was a positive "presentation card" for the Obama administration to the region as a whole. They also expressed interest in counternarcotics and poverty reduction cooperation, and noted their interest in reaching out to their counterparts in the US Congress. As the authorized legislative liaison with the Embassy, this group had met with the Ambassador before his expulsion, but the tone of the meeting, especially after the BRV's communique condemning the Secretary's Globovision interview, indicates that at least among some prominent Chavistas there remains an interest in improved bilateral relations. End Summary.

POSITIVE ON US REACTION TO HONDURAS

12. (C) AN First Vice President Saul Ortega noted the importance of the speedy US response to Honduras, which he assessed would be positive for relations with Venezuela and the region as a whole. He suggested that it would serve as a positive "presentation card" for President Obama to highlight his administration's new approach to Latin America. The Ambassador emphasized twice, however, that Chavez's attacks against the United States during his July 5 independence day speech in Bolivar State had put the Ambassador in an uncomfortable position. He noted that Chavez had raised questions about the US commitment to resolving the Honduran conflict despite the public positions taken by both the President and the Secretary at the very time that Honduran First Lady Xiomara Castro was being hosted at the US Ambassador's residence in Tegucigalpa. Ortega admitted that he was surprised when that fact recently came to light after Mrs. Zelaya left the Ambassador's residence to participate in a demonstration against the interim Honduran Government.

UNHAPPY WITH GLOBOVISION

13. (C) Francisco Torrealba registered the group's objection to the Secretary's July 7 interview with opposition-oriented Globovision TV, noting that it appeared "unbalanced" for a representative of the US Government to grant an interview to a Venezuelan civil society actor that is so ardently opposed to Chavez. He asserted that within the opposition, some entities like Globovision have no interest in improved relations between Venezuela and the United States. The Ambassador responded that the Secretary had merely granted a longstanding interview request from the media outlet and had taken the opportunity to speak directly to Venezuelans, including congratulating them on their independence day two days prior. When pressed, Saul Ortega admitted that he had not actually watched the interview but said that the content was not the issue, but rather the fact that she had granted the interview given Globovision's role in Venezuela's highly politicized environment.

14. (C) Calixto Ortega contended that Globovision was actually trying to provoke the revocation of its license, an action it would then seize upon to bring international condemnation upon the government. He noted that at the end of the day, Globovision is a business and is primarily concerned with its profit. Ortega assessed that its owners were calculating that they would lose only the small free-to-air percentage of their viewing audience in Caracas and Valencia if its concession were revoked, while retaining the bulk of their viewers through cable. He added that if it became strictly a cable-only channel, Globovision would no longer have to endure the yoke of CONATEL or other state controls and penalties. Ortega also assessed that Globovision's owners were unhappy with their purported loss of influence over opposition political parties, and that they are trying to reassert their control.

CARACAS 00000863 002.3 OF 002

15. (C) Asked if the government would fall into this apparent "trap," Ortega declined to give an opinion. Following upon this theme, the Ambassador said that the perception in the United States and elsewhere was that press freedom was under assault in Venezuela and that closing Globovision and/or the over 200 radio stations who have been threatened would be very damaging to Venezuela's reputation.

COOPERATION AHEAD?

16. (C) Ortega suggested without prompting several times that counternarcotics cooperation was an area in which the United State and Venezuela could work together. He lamented the insidiousness of the problem and hinted at a regional counterdrug effort. The Ambassador noted the success of the regional peacekeeping and stability efforts in Haiti, and Ortega indicated that like in Haiti, Honduras would greatly benefit from complementary poverty reduction efforts. The group also noted their interest in reaching out to their legislative counterparts in Washington, including suggesting a possible meeting between National Assembly President Cilia Flores and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

17. (C) Comment: The Friendship Group hosted this breakfast in keeping with their role as the main (if not only) liaison with the USG within the National Assembly. Although the meeting itself was not groundbreaking -- in fact, the Ambassador has met with them previously -- it was still a positive sign coming on the heels of the Foreign Ministry's angry criticism of the Secretary's Globovision interview (septel). The group's decision not to cancel the meeting and indeed suggestions of areas in which Venezuela and the United States can cooperate seem to indicate that at least some prominent Chavistas perceive that bilateral relations have thawed after a ten-month freeze. Ultimately, it will require a gesture from Chavez himself to sanction broader and more

positive engagement by his government with the United States.

End Comment.

DUDDY